

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

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CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 2530

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, TH

SUBJECT: THE DEMOCRAT PARTY'S RESURRECTION

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

SUMMARY: THE DEMOCRAT PARTY IS PICKING UP THE THREADS OF ITS FORMER EXISTENCE AND PREPARING FOR ANOTHER ELECTORAL ATTEMPT. THE DEMOCRATS HAVE A REPUTATION AS THE SINGLE THAI POLITICAL ORGANIZATION WHICH RESEMBLES A WESTERN POLITICAL PARTY. THE PARTY ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN IN ABEYANCE FOR FOUR YEARS, AND IS ENTERING THE NEW POLITICAL ERA IN THAILAND WITH A LEADERSHIP RIFT APPARENTLY SQUARING OFF M.R. SENI PRAMOJ AND THA-NGAI SUWANNATHAT. THE PARTY HAS SCHEDULED A CONVENTION FEBRUARY 24 TO SELECT ITS LEADERSHIP. UNTIL THEN IT IS DIFFICULT TO DETERMINE WHICH WINE WILL BE POURED INTO THE OLD BOTTLE. END SUMMARY.

1. THE DEMOCRAT PARTY HAS BEEN ON THE THAI SCENE SINCE WORLD WAR II. IT EVEN FORMED A GOVERNMENT IN 1946, BUT HAS ESSENTIALLY BEEN THE LOYAL (AND VOCAL) OPPOSITION PARTY ON THOSE OCCASIONS WHEN THERE WERE PARLIAMENTS.

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WITH ELECTIONS FOR PARLIAMENT TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED FOR

THE SUMMER OF 1974, THE DEMOCRAT PARTY IS PICKING UP THE THREADS OF ITS EXISTENCE. ALTHOUGH WITHOUT NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY EXPERIENCE FOR THE LAST FOUR YEARS, PARTY CANDIDATES HAVE MEANWHILE PARTICIPATED IN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS.

2. THE PARTY HAS A NUMBER OF ADVANTAGES THAT IT COULD AMPLIFY IN THE COMING MONTHS. INDIVIDUAL PARTY MEMBERS HAVE GOOD RELATIONS WITH THE STUDENT MOVEMENT. FORMER PARLIAMENTARIANS PHICHAIRATTAKUL (BANGKOK), CHUAN LEEKPHAI (TRANG), DAMRONG LATTAPIPAT (BANGKOK), AND OTHERS INCLUDING M.R. SENI PRAMOJ, WERE FAVORED SPEAKERS FOR STUDENT SEMINARS AND RALLIES WELL BEFORE THE EVENTS OF OCTOBER 1973. A KEY ISSUE DURING THE COMING CAMPAIGN WILL BE CLAIMS OF HOW DEMONSTRABLY ANTI-THANOM GOVERNMENT A PARTY OR INDIVIDUAL MIGHT HAVE BEEN. THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL (NEC) ARRESTED TWO DEMOCRAT PARTY MEMBERS UTHAI PHIMCHAICHORN (CHONBURI) AND BUNKERD HIRANKHAM (CHAIYAPHUM), AS WELL AS INDEPENDENT ANANT PHAKPRAPHAI (PHITSANULOK)--ON TREASON CHARGES IN EARLY 1972. THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (NLA) JUST RELEASED THE THREE DETAINEES JANUARY 18. THIS EXAMPLE OF POLITICAL FORTITUDE FROM THE DEMOCRAT PARLIAMENTARIANS MAY NOT BE LOST ON THE SOPHISTICATED URBAN ELECTORATE.

. AN INDICATION THAT THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY HAS RETAINED A FOLLOWING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS IS THAT THE ROYALLY APPOINTED NATIONAL CONVENTION SENT SEVEN DEMOCRATS TO THE PRESENT NLA: BOONTHAN THONGSAWAT (LAMPANG-264 VOTES), SAMAK SUNTHORNWET (BANGKOK-234), PHICHAIRATTAKUL (224), DAMRONG LATTAPIPAT (221), NATRUDHI SUTHISONGKRAM (BANGKOK-201), SURIN MARSDIT (RAYONG-169) AND YAI SAWITCHART (NAKON SAWAN-162). AS ACTIVE PARLIAMENTARIANS THEY CAN BUILD THE REPUTATION OF THE PARTY OVER THE COMING MONTHS. YAI, FOR EXAMPLE, PROPOSED A DRAFT BILL TO THE CODE OF CRIMINAL PROCEDURES WHICH WOULD TRANSFER THE POWER TO INVESTIGATE CRIMES FROM THE POLICE TO THE LOCAL CIVILIAN OFFICIALS. SINCE DEPARTMENT OF LOCAL ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS DESIRE THIS CHANGE, THE DEMOCRAT PARTY

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CAN MAKE IMPORTANT ALLIES IN SUPPORTING THE BILL.

4. THE PARTY, HOWEVER, ALSO SUFFERS FROM A NUMBER OF DISADVANTAGES. IT HAS TENDED TO BE A PARTY IDENTIFIED CLOSELY WITH BANGKOK. THE PROVINCES ELECTED ONLY A FEW DEMOCRAT PARLIAMENTARIANS IN THE PAST. THE PARTY RECEIVED A BLACK MARK FROM ITS IMPORTANT CONSTITUENTS, HOWEVER, AFTER IT SUCCESSFULLY CONTESTED THE

MUNICIPALITY ELECTIONS OF 1968. ONCE IN POWER, THE DEMOCRAT ASSEMBLYMEN PERFORMED POORLY. THE DEMOCRAT PARTY ALSO SUFFERS FROM A BRIDESMAID MENTALITY. MANY PEOPLE RECOGNIZE THE PARTY'S GOOD WORK WHEN IT WAS THE OPPOSITION, BUT QUESTION ITS CAPACITY TO ACTUALLY FORM AND RUN A GOVERNMENT. THE NEW POLITICAL CLIMATE IN THAILAND HAS GENERATED A DESIRE TO BREAK AWAY FROM THE PAST. THUS, THE NEWSPAPERS HAVE QUOTED SOME YOUNG PROFESSORS AS SAYING THAT THEY WOULD PREFER TO START NEW PARTIES RATHER THAN JOIN THE "ESTABLISHMENT" DEMOCRAT PARTY. LEADERSHIP STRUGGLES MAY ALSO DAMAGE THE PARTY. ONE PARTY MEMBER MENTIONED TO US THAT FORMER PARLIAMENTARIAN CHUMPHOL MANINET (CHACHOENGSAO) HAD BEEN THROWN OUT OF THE PARTY. HIS ATTEMPTS TO FIGHT HIS WAY BACK IN COULD BE DISRUPTIVE (ALTHOUGH THE SPEAKER NEVER EXPLAINED WHY CHUMPHIL WOULD GO TO SO MUCH TROUBLE). HE ALSO SAID THAT THONBURI MEMBERS WERE THREATENING THE INTEGRITY OF THE PARTY.

PARTY DISSENSIONS.

5. ALTHOUGH THE PARTY ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN IN ABEYANCE FOUR YEARS, MOST OF THE MEMBERS CONTINUED TO MEET INFREQUENTLY, ONCE IT IS LEGAL TO REGISTER A POLITICAL PARTY, TWO FORMER DEMOCRAT PARTY GROUPS MAY BE COMPETING FOR THE PARTY'S ESTEEMED NAME. THE PRESS IDENTIFIES THA-NGAI SUWANNATHAT (THONBURI) AS AN "OLD GUARD" LEADER. HE REPORTEDLY SUPPORTS KHUNYING LEKHA APAIWONG, THE WIDOW OF THE PARTY'S FOUNDER, KHUANG, AS PARTY HEAD. THIS GROUP IS COMPOSED OF SOME OF THE ORIGINAL PARTY FOUNDERS, SUCH AS FORMER PARTY SECRETARY GENERAL YAI SAWITCHART AND THAWIL VICHIENTHUM. THEY HAVE ALREADY PUBLISHED A PARTY NEWSPAPER UNDER THE SAME BANNER. "SARN PAK PRACHATIPATAI" (DEMOCRAT PARTY NEWS), AS THE PARTY'S

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PREVIOUS NEWS SHEET.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGKOK 2530

6. THE "OLD GUARD" FACES A GROUP OF REFORMERS WHO HAVE ORGANIZED AROUND M.R. SENI PRAMOJ, FORMER PARTY LEADER. A CENTRAL ISSUE APPEARS TO BE THE DEGREE OF CONTROL THE PARTY EXERCISES OVER ITS PARLIAMENTARIANS. THE REFORMERS WANT TO REPLACE THE SECRETARY GENERAL WITH A BOARD WHOSE MANDATE IS TO SELECT CANDIDATES AND DRAFT PARTY REGULATIONS. REPRESENTATIVES OF THE "YOUNG TURKS" INCLUDE CHUAN KEEKPAI, SAMAK SUNTHORNWET, MONGKOL SIMAROT (CHIEF, WATER RESOURCES ENGINEERING UNIT, OFFICE OF ACCELERATED RURAL DEVELOPMENT, MINISTRY OF INTERIOR), SUWAT CHANPRASET (WITH AIR SIAM), AND DIREK APAYAKOSOL (WITH INTERNATIONAL MARKETING SYSTEMS).

7. KHUNYING LEKHA HELD A LAWN PARTY DECEMBER 10 TO WHICH PRACTICALLY ALL PARTY MEMBERS EXCEPT SENI WERE INVITED. THE "OLD GUARD" RECENTLY PLACED AN ADVERTISE-
MENT IN THE THAI NEWSPAPERS CALLING FOR NEW MEMBERS TO SIGN UP AT HER HOUSE. DESPITE THESE MANEUVERINGS, SENI APPARENTLY HAS PARTY AGREEMENT TO HOLD A CONVENTION IN LUMPINI HALL FEBRUARY 24. THIS CONVENTION WILL SELECT THE PARTY LEADERSHIP. RECENT NEWSPAPER ARTICLES SUGGEST THAT THE "OLD GUARD" CHALLENGE TO SENI'S LEADERSHIP HAS FALTERED.

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IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS.

8. ONE OF THE REFORMERS RECENTLY TOLD US THAT HE WAS IN CHARGE OF SELECTING POSSIBLE PARTY CANDIDATES IN HIS HOME PROVINCE. HE SAID THAT THE PARTY NEEDED A "YOUNGER" LOOK AND THEREFORE HE WAS LOOKING FOR YOUNGER PROFESSIONALS OR BUSINESSMEN. OTHERS, HOWEVER, HAVE APPROACHED HIM, BUT HE CHARACTERIZED THEM AS OPPORTUNISTS WHO WOULD NOT FIT

THE DESIRED IMAGE. (COMMENT: RECRUITMENT, PARTICULARLY IN UPCOUNTRY PROVINCES, WILL BE A CRITICAL FACTOR IN DETERMINING THE PARTY'S ELECTORAL PROSPECTS).

9. THE DEMOCRAT PARTY APPARENTLY SUFFERS FROM FINANCIAL PROBLEMS. SINCE THE SUSPENSION OF POLITICAL PARTIES FOUR YEARS AGO, PARTY COFFERS ARE LOW, PERHAPS NON-EXISTENT. COLLECTING THE MONEY TO RUN A LARGE NATIONWIDE CAMPAIGN WILL BE ONE OF THE PARTY'S FIRST PRIORITIES.

10. THE DEMOCRAT PARTY MUST ALSO WRESTLE WITH WHAT TYPE OF PROGRAM IT WILL SUPPORT. NOMINAL PARTY LEADER SENI HAS SUGGESTED THAT THE DEMOCRATS SUPPORT DR. PUEY UNGPHAKORN, FORMER GOVERNOR OF THE BANK OF THAILAND, FOR PRIME MINISTER. FELLOW PARTY MEMBERS HAVE CRITICIZED THIS CHOICE. SENI HAS ALSO SUGGESTED THAT THE GOVERNMENT PROVIDE MORE SOCIAL SERVICES. PICKING UP A SUGGESTION BROACHED IN OTHER CIRCLES, SENI PROPOSED JANUARY 29 THAT COMMUNIST TERRORISTS LAY DOWN THEIR ARMS AND JOIN THE DEMOCRAT PARTY. (COMMENT: THIS ADVICE ASSUMES THAT MANY TERRORISTS ARE NOT HARD CORE COMMUNISTS, BUT POLITICAL DISSIDENTS WHO DID NOT HAVE A LEGAL AVENUE OF REMONSTRATION.)

11. CONCLUSION: THERE ARE OTHER VARIABLES GOVERNING THE RESUSCITATION OF THE DEMOCRAT PARTY AND ITS FUTURE ELECTORAL ROLE. UNTIL THE ELECTION AND POLITICAL PARTY BILLS BECOME LAW, THE STATUS OF THE DEMOCRAT PARTY, ALONG WITH THAT OF ALL OTHERS BUT THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THAILAND, WILL REMAIN NEBULOUS. THE DEMOCRATS NEVERTHELESS HAVE GOOD PROSPECTS OF OFFERING SHARP COMPETITION IN THE ELECTIONS TO COME.

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